



Living in limbo... Ladislav Balaz (left) and a fellow Czech Gypsy on the bench in Clacton-on-Sea, while Valeria Bockova and daughter Mary (right) also wait anxiously to see what the future holds for them

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADRIAN ARBIB

## SYLUM SEEKERS 1

forced out of their homes by racists who threatened to kill them, Gypsies are still not considered genuine refugees by the government, reports **Jake Bowers-Burbridge**

# On the road to nowhere

richly heathered home and buy some lucky weather. It's a call still used by Gypsies plying their age-old trade. But while Gypsies may be used to dealing in fortunes, they are rarely possessed them. As a rule, they are always seen in personal circumstances, and the ultimate predicament of the community. They are a people without state, or even an official international organisation to defend them. They are the ultimate scapegoats to be blamed with impunity as 'bogus' asylum seekers.

Under the image of a people in a move when their community starts to blow in a different direction, there is a story of racial persecution that is unrecognised by

the governments who now find themselves dealing with a people defined by the Czech president, Václav Havel, as 'the human test of civil society'. But how well is Britain standing up to that test?

Ladislav Balaz is a Romany refugee under siege. The electricity to his north London home stopped working this year, his sister-in-law has died from cancer after being refused treatment because of her race, and he's just heard that skin head gangs are rampaging through the home town he fled in the Czech province of northern Moravia.

Most British people, passing him in the street, would not even know he is a Gypsy. He's never owned a car, and in his life and you get the feeling he wouldn't know the end of a horse from the other. But three

skin might have betrayed his origins in a much whiter Britain 100 years ago, but nowadays it just helps him fit into the multicultural mosaic.

He enjoys the new found anonymity he has gained on the streets of north London. 'In my home town, Delnva, my colour marks me out,' he says. 'We never ventured out to the streets at night. You see, in the Czech Republic there are only two kinds of people, the 'white' Czechs and the 'black' Romany. Skinheads have killed 32 Roma in the last 10 years. My friend Milan was one of them. A gang of them beat him to death outside my home because, to them, he was just a filthy Gypsy.'

Outraged by the attack, Balaz sought justice for his friend, only to witness a conspiracy plot to

think was more at home in apartheid South Africa than an aspiring member of the European Union. 'The rumour told me that he had been run down by a truck,' Balaz says, 'but we saw them kill him with our own eyes.'

Six weeks later, in June 1998, Balaz received an anonymous letter signed by the 'Gothic sect, k.k.k., S.S.' and a swastika. It said, 'I told you, quickly get going. Hitler should have lived two more years, then there would not be any more gypsies. We want a Moravia clean of black gypsies'. Ladislav fled with his wife Marta and his six children to Britain, where his life is now in limbo. He is one of the thousands of supposedly 'bogus' refugees revealed by the tabloid media.

The 1951 UN convention relating

to the status of refugees supposedly guarantees protection to any person who has fled their country 'owing to a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion'. But Home Office guidelines to magistrates refuse to recognise Romany persecution, despite its continuing documentation by Amnesty International, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the US state department.

'The Home Office says that you are not a genuine refugee because you are a Gypsy,' says the magistrate in a refreshing dose of honesty at Taylor House, where immigration appeals are heard in London. The woman she is addressing has no legal representation and it's clear

that this is the end of the line. Dr Donald Kenrick will, giving testimony of persecution in Poland, and raising the defendant's status as Polish Romany on the line he heard in the court the

Kenrick has been a fighter for Romany rights for last 30 years. At the age of 10, he spent many of his days helping refugees fight for claims to asylum. 'There are 10 cases every day,' he says, 'and when I can, find a way to get the government to see that these people are persecuted because of their race. We've won a few.'

But the few cases that won are a mere drop in the ocean. Of the 5,000 Romany as

